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BUREAU OF GOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH

938 Lafayette St., Suite 200
New Orleans, LA 70113
Phone 504-525-4152
www.bgr.org

BGR Media Release

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Contact: Amy L. Glovinsky, *President & CEO*
(504) 525-4152, ext. 107

Two-Authorizer Structure Critical to Orleans Parish Schools' Success

Today BGR releases *One Plus One: The Dual Authorizer Structure and the Future of New Orleans Schools*. The report seeks to inform lawmakers and the public about the charter authorizing structure in Orleans Parish and the potential risks that accompany a diminished role for the state in charter management.

The report walks through the significant academic gains that followed the transfer of most Orleans Parish public schools to the state Recovery School District (RSD) and the decision of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to charter all RSD schools.

To be clear, BGR is not currently taking a position on the issue of whether, when or to what extent RSD charter schools should be placed under the management of the Orleans Parish School Board. Instead, BGR seeks to ensure that, as lawmakers chart the course for Orleans Parish public schools, whether now or in future legislative sessions, they elevate the charter authorizing structure among the many issues that are essential to long-term charter school success.

In New Orleans, both BESE and the School Board serve as full-fledged charter school authorizers. This means both can directly authorize and oversee charter schools.

Having BESE as a full-fledged alternative authorizer to the School Board generally follows both national trends and best practices. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), which sets national standards for charter authorizing, recommends that states establish at least one high-quality authorizer in addition to the local school board.

The two-authorizer structure in New Orleans provides charter schools with a choice of application processes for prospective schools, an appeal process for unsuccessful applicants to the School Board, and transfer rights for existing RSD and School Board charter schools. These

mechanisms, absent in a single-authorizer structure, give schools the option of another authorizer in the face of arbitrary treatment or faltering performance by the School Board or BESE.

Competitive forces created by the two-authorizer structure encourage authorizers to treat schools fairly. If an authorizer does not, it risks losing good charter applicants and schools to the competing authorizer.

If RSD charter schools transfer to the School Board and BESE stops granting New Orleans charters in the RSD, BESE's role as an alternative authorizer will weaken. BESE will oversee only a handful of local charter schools outside of the RSD, and its future authorizing will be limited to hearing appeals from local applicants or transfer requests. This will leave authorizing functions almost entirely in the School Board's hands.

Without a competing authorizer, the School Board would no longer face the same level of pressure to maintain appropriate policies, processes and systems. This raises the risk that it will allow local politics to influence important authorizing decisions, such as approving charter schools, renewing charters, and intervening in or closing non-performing or non-compliant schools. The School Board could be less likely than other school districts to be hostile to charter schools, as 75% of its schools are already charter schools. But as a locally elected school board, it is vulnerable to political pressures. Given the School Board's troubled history, the risk of political influence in authorizing decisions is all too real.

Legislators should avoid restricting BESE's authorizing power. At a minimum, legislators should preserve the safeguards of BESE's appellate role and ability to consider transfer requests. However, to maintain the structure's current alignment relative to best practices for the long term, it would also be prudent to consider providing BESE with direct authorizing power outside of the RSD.

"New Orleans public schools have made remarkable progress during the past 10 years, and we now have in place a nationally recognized model for success," said BGR President Amy L. Glovinsky. "Lawmakers should be careful to avoid changes to the charter authorizing structure that could put that progress at risk."

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BGR is a private, nonprofit, independent research organization. Since its founding in 1932, it has been dedicated to informed public policy-making and the effective use of public resources in the Greater New Orleans area. For more information call 504-525-4152 or visit BGR's website, www.bgr.org.